TRUE COLORS
STORIES OF BAPTIST INCLUSION

Foreword by Bill J. Leonard
Jake Hall, Editor
Acknowledgments

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This book is dedicated to all those who have worked and continue to work toward a more inclusive and compassionate church. May it inspire us to see the world in all its vibrant and diverse colors and to move into a future where all are welcomed and affirmed.
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Preface

The beauty of a prism lies in the way it refracts light, revealing the colors that are hidden within it. Each facet of the prism offers a new perspective, a new way of seeing the world around us.

In much the same way, the contributors to this volume offer a range of experiences around LGBTQ+ inclusion in the Baptist tradition. They are like the facets of a prism, each reflecting a different aspect of the light that shines on this complex and contentious issue.

Each contributor has served as a congregational minister, and each has come to understand the love of God in Christ in a different way, both within themselves and within their congregations and contexts. Through their essays, they reveal the true colors of inclusion—colors that have too often been dimmed or dismissed within the church. They expose alternative readings of the text, theological frameworks, and leadership strategies that shade and diminish the fullness of the body of Christ.

These honest readings of the Bible and fresh theological frameworks provide insights into the lived experience of LGBTQ+ persons and their congregations. The essays are not only thoughtful and engaging but also deeply personal and transformative. Each contributor shares their own journey of understanding and their own struggle to fully embody the good news and to lead their congregations to do the same. They invite deeper conversation on the expansive love of God in Christ.

In a world that often seems divided and polarized, the contributors to True Colors: Stories of Baptist Inclusion offer a vision of the church as a place of welcome and beauty. They challenge us to see beyond the narrow confines of tradition and orthodoxy and to embrace the full spectrum of human experience and diversity.

We hope that this volume will be a valuable resource for pastors, congregations, and individuals seeking to deepen their understanding and live out the call to love and justice that is at the heart of the gospel. May it inspire us to see the world in all its vibrant and diverse colors and to work together to build a more inclusive and compassionate church.

Rev. Dr. Jake Hall
Foreword

Dr. Bill J. Leonard

Dr. Bill J. Leonard is a Founding Dean, Professor Emeritus at Wake Forest University School of Divinity, and author of 26 books.

Reading the essays in this volume reminded me of a passage from Frederick Buechner’s 1982 autobiographical text, *The Sacred Journey*. The late Presbyterian preacher/writer comments, “One way or another the journey through time starts for us all, and for all of us too, that journey is in at least one sense the same journey because what it is primarily, I think, is a journey in search.” Buechner suggests that each of us must determine the nature of that search, noting that while “there will be as many answers as there are searchers,” there also are “certain general answers” that include three common quests. Buechner says, “We search for a self to be. We search for other selves to love. We search for work to do.”

The contributors to *True Colors* testify to the nature of their searches, informed by issues of sexuality and spirituality. The contributors who write from inside the LGBTQ+ community reflect on their “search for a self to be,” detailing many of the struggles they confronted in coming to terms with their sexual orientation or gender identity. They describe a sense of self they believe to be inherent in their identity as human beings. It was no easy exploration, but it was one that carried them through issues of guilt, secrecy, fear, alienation, and in some cases exile, often highlighted by their decision to “come out” to friends, family, and the world in which they live.

In another 1982 study, *Embracing the Exile*, therapist John E. Fortunato, who identifies himself as both “gay and Christian,” wrote,

Disownment or rejection by family—often the norm for gay people—is different from family turmoil revolving around an adolescent’s adjustment at puberty, or a daughter who, at twenty-two, is trying to cut the umbilical cord, or a son who is about to marry a woman his parents don’t like. It’s different because, unlike these other situations, it’s not how a son or daughter is acting that’s being rejected, it’s who they are constitutionally. They don’t have a choice about being gay, there isn’t anything inherently destructive in their sexual orientation, and yet, once found
out, they are treated like lepers by the people who supposedly love them the most.²

Writing four decades ago, Fortunato sought to offer hope to people in what is now referred to as the LGBTQ+ community. Implicitly and explicitly, he longed for social changes that became twenty-first-century realities including legalizing same-sex marriage, the development of “welcoming and affirming” congregations in multiple Christian denominations, and an increasing acceptance of LGBTQ+ persons and relationships in public and private life.

In 2022, Gallup’s annual Mood of the Nation survey suggested that “while satisfaction on many of the other issues decreased this year, the numbers on gay and lesbian individuals grew substantially: In 2022, 62% of survey respondents said they were very or somewhat satisfied with the acceptance of gays and lesbians in the nation, up from 55% in 2021 and 56% in 2020.”³ At the same time, there is increasing evidence of significant legislative and ecclesiastical backlash against such progress, evidenced in new laws aimed at people who are transgender, “Don’t Say Gay” regulations in public education, and increasing violence toward LGBTQ+ persons and communities. Ecclesiastically, a number of Christian congregations now require members to sign anti-LGBTQ+ doctrinal statements or be dismissed from the church rolls.⁴ The LGBTQ+ contributors in this book acknowledge those stark realities, while insisting that they were compelled to pursue searches for their true self.

The contributors who detail their congregational journeys of response to LGBTQ+ people indicate that those faith communities were also involved in a “search for a self to be.” They acknowledge the sometimes hesitant journeys of congregations toward recognizing, and ultimately affirming, the authentic self at the heart of those who have come to terms with their sexual orientation. Some acknowledge that the decision of certain churches to be “welcoming and affirming” to, for, and with LGBTQ+ individuals involved decisions about congregational “selfhood” and the nature of the gospel itself, discoveries not without churchly division and denominational dismissal.

The LGBTQ+ folks whose essays appear here confirm that a sense of self shaped the search “for other selves to love” amid cultural, familial, political, and ecclesiastical resistance. The ministers and congregations described here confess that their concern to live out the “Jesus Way” led them to expand their search “for other selves to love” by reaching out to people in the LGBTQ+ community and others on the cultural and churchly margins. That decision impacted—indeed, expanded—their own sense of self and gospel. In her True Colors essay, Baptist minister Elizabeth Mangham Lott notes,
To preach Jesus week in and week out required me to consider how wide and long and high and deep the love of God might be. I shared sermons about a man crossing the boundaries of Galilee and Samaria without regard to purity codes, eating with crooked tax collectors and rumored sex workers, restoring those cast out of community because of physical or mental illness, and reserving his harshest critiques for religious insiders who thought they were preserving the right things by keeping “those people” out.

In his 2013 study, *Queer Lessons for Churches on the Straight and Narrow*, Cody Sanders, pastor, professor, and contributor to this book, asks how loving relationships exemplified in same-sex marriages might reshape churchly responses to marriage itself. He writes,

> If we could appreciate the possibilities opened to us by the shifting nature of social, legal, and religious conceptions of marriage, rather than fear these changes, might we discover some potential for growth? If churches possessed a bit of wonderment, rather than dread, over the abilities of queer people to forge intimate partnerships and covenanted relationships despite decades and decades of nearly total opposition from every corner of society, we might find ourselves asking: “What have queer people learned about the formation of relationships that we would all benefit from knowing?”

In that brief passage, Sanders challenges both gay and straight Christians to pursue Buechner’s idea that “we search for work to do” as something that the two communities can do in exploring the work of the gospel together. In his *True Colors* chapter, Sanders is equally direct, urging progressive congregations to consider LGBTQ+ people in their midst as full co-laborers in the work of the gospel. He writes,

> as bearers of the Good News—and the belovedness and belonging of LGBTQ+ people is especially “good news”—we’ve got to be storytellers of that goodness. We learned that lesson from Jesus! And if the only place we endeavor to tell the Good News story is inside the walls of our churches, there are many who will never experience it.

Sanders and Elizabeth Mangham Lott, like other writers in this book, remind us that the search for a self to be, others to love, and work to do sends us to
scripture and the Jesus Story. In Luke 4, Jesus references the prophet Isaiah in describing the work he was to do and, by implication, the work of those who follow him. It is a calling

…to bring good news to the poor.
To proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (4:18-19)

Reading that text in his hometown synagogue, Jesus expands it to include an array of outsiders, noting that “in the time of Elijah” when “there was a severe famine over all the land,” there were “many widows in Israel,” but the prophet went only to “a [Gentile] widow at Zarephath in Sidon.” Likewise, there were many lepers in Israel, yet “none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” Luke says that on hearing this, “all in the synagogue were filled with rage.” They rose up, drove Jesus “out of the town,” and were ready to “throw him off the cliff.” Welcoming the outsider, both then and now, is controversial, difficult, and dangerous, yet it is intrinsic to the Jesus Story.

In the earliest churches, the “inclusion of the Gentiles,” as shaped by the Apostle Paul, was surely one of the most divisive, radical, and grace-filled ideas and actions in the history of Christianity. Opposition was strong, especially since, as one scholar comments, “Gentiles ate impure substances, and came into regular contact with impure substances, and—what is worse—committed idolatry and defiling sexual acts.” Yet in Acts 10, Peter the Apostle has a vision in which he learns, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (10:15 NRSV). Shortly thereafter, he is summoned by the Spirit to the home of Cornelius, a Gentile. On arrival, Peter declares, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean” (10:33 NRSV). Then, in Galatians 2, Paul says that in Antioch, Peter hung out with the Gentiles until certain Jewish Christians arrived, and “he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy…” (Gal 2:12-13 NRSV).

In the early 1980s, I sat in on a workshop at a missions conference conducted at the theological seminary where I was then teaching. The workshop was led by a prominent retired Baptist missionary whom I had heard as a teenager. In the course of her presentation, she asserted that if “God were in control” in the USA, then the government would be compelled to “execute homosexuals, adulterous couples, and rebellious children.” Knowing certain students in the room, I realized that had that been the case, a considerable number of the students would surely have been
long gone. A professorial colleague inquired of the missionary, “But what about the prodigal son?” She looked at both of us and declared, “You boys don’t believe the Bible, do you?”

The missionary’s comment and the essays in this book remind us of how often in the church’s history Christians have acted punitively against people and movements deemed heretical or in some way outside the boundaries of the gospel—claiming biblical support for fighting holy wars, beheading heretics, drowning witches, keeping slaves, and enforcing conversion therapy. Only after decades, sometimes centuries, did we finally realize that what we thought to be “biblical” turned out not to be gospel. We might reflect on that as we read this important and timely text.

Notes

3 Marina Pitofsky, “America is changing how it views accepting gay and lesbian people, new poll reveals,” *USA Today*, February 2, 2022.